

ROUTING AND RECORD SHEET

SUBJECT: (Optional)

A November Surprise? A Provocation Scenario in Nicaragua

FROM:

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This memo from Harry Cochran suggests that the Soviets are goading the US into an air strike on Nicaragua in hopes of reviving a cold war atmosphere which, in Harry's view, Moscow needs to do for domestic reasons.

HEM

Herbert E. Meyer
VC/NIC

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7 November 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

THROUGH : Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM : Harry C. Cochran
Special Assistant for Warning

SUBJECT : A NOVEMBER SURPRISE? A PROVOCATION SCENARIO IN NICARAGUA

1. If the Soviet cargo ship Bakuriani delivers MIG-21s or perhaps L-39s to Corinto, this event will trigger what has been conceived as a carefully orchestrated Soviet-Cuban-Sandinista provocation that will be aimed at eliciting a vigorous and threatening response from the Reagan Administration. There are strong indications that a deliberate provocation scenario has been in the works since mid-summer.

2. The Castro regime has been preparing the Cuban people for some kind of confrontation with the U.S. since the middle of August. Cuban media--particularly national television--have been highlighting displays of modern military equipment, and this public indoctrination has been accompanied by island-wide civil defense exercises, simulated "US invasions," mobilization activities in the armed forces, and intensive training by local Committees for Defense of the Revolution. [redacted] the entire Cuban people have been carrying out urgent preparations to confront an attack in what Fidel Castro has said will be "the war of all the people." Fidel and Raul Castro have video-taped speeches that have been shown to all party members, officers of the Ministry of the Armed Forces, and Ministry of Interior employees in which Fidel warned that if President Reagan is reelected, the US will invade El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Cuba. He said Cuba is making "major military preparations," including the establishment of defense zones in order to "fight everywhere." In these speeches, Castro has also warned of American air strikes and implied that Havana will have to be evacuated because it will be the primary objective of an American invasion.

3. In addition to this extraordinary indoctrination of domestic audiences, Cuban Foreign Ministry officials [redacted] in Havana last month expressed anxieties about the Administration's intentions toward Nicaragua and Cuba after the US elections. Castro himself made similar points in an earlier conversation with former Prime Minister Edward Heath, saying he was not worried about a "major American invasion" but was concerned about the possibility of "pin-prick attacks."

4. The groundwork for a provocation scenario may have been laid during the visit to Moscow last June by Daniel Ortega and other Sandinista leaders. Before departing Managua, Ortega publicly underscored his continuing efforts to obtain "adequate aircraft" to defend against "US aggression." Reporting since last

SECRET

-2-

SECRET

25X1

25X1

spring has suggested that the Sandinistas hoped to complete the runway at Punta Huete airfield by October in order to receive Soviet-made fighter aircraft. In September, the new Nicaraguan charge said his government would receive MIG-21s from Cuba soon after the Nicaraguan elections on 4 November. He claimed that Sandinista leaders believed that elections "will give their government the legitimacy and international support needed to deter a US invasion," and he indicated that the MIGs would be stationed at Punta Huete. The charge declared that if the US does invade Nicaragua, paramilitary groups composed of local nationals recruited by the Sandinistas will retaliate by attacking US embassies and other American installations in all the Central American countries, Colombia, Bolivia, and Spain. He warned that American ambassadors will be targeted for assassination.

5. The scenario calls for confronting the Reagan Administration with a fait accompli. As the Bakuriani sailed north along the west coast of South America in late October, Nicaraguan officials attempted to deflect US attention from the sensitive issue of aircraft deliveries by publicly declaring on the 26th that while Nicaragua was seeking to obtain military aircraft from Czechoslovakia, it has no firm plans yet to bring in either these or more advanced aircraft. Interior Minister Tomas Borge told a news conference that, "It is not planned at this time that MIG airplanes will come, and it is not planned at this time that any other type of planes will come." Chief military spokeswoman Lt. Rosa Pasos also said on 26 October that Nicaragua was "arranging" to obtain L-39 aircraft from Czechoslovakia, but she added that no date has been fixed for their arrival. A Washington Post dispatch from Managua on 27 October ventured that these Sandinista statements had been "triggered by news reports from the United States that radar gear for use with advanced aircraft had arrived recently at Nicaragua's Caribbean port of El Bluff." This report added that Nicaraguan military officers said that the cargo being unloaded at El Bluff was not aircraft, but they left open the possibility that it might be some other type of weapon. It seems possible that the arrival of the Bulgarian freighter at El Bluff was timed to divert attention from the Bakuriani's approach to Corinto.

Soviet Motives and Calculations

6. Moscow's fundamental motive in authorizing the shipment of combat aircraft to Nicaragua and in collaborating with the Cubans and Sandinistas in planning a provocation scenario is to compel the Reagan Administration to respond in a manner that will enable the Soviets to "neutralize" the President's declarations since last January of his interest in a constructive dialogue to improve US-Soviet relations and to revive a hostile confrontational atmosphere that will allow Moscow to prosecute its preferred strategy of "judo diplomacy" against the Administration. The President's more conciliatory posture since mid-January has frustrated Soviet strategy and defused Soviet maneuvers to exploit perceived transatlantic differences over policy toward the Soviet Union. In sum, the Soviets are gambling that a provocation scenario in Nicaragua will entail little or no risk of a direct Soviet-US military confrontation but will abruptly revive a cold war atmosphere that will afford greater opportunities to press the political strategy they have pursued over the past four years. This strategy has

SECRET

25X1

-3-

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25X1

been aimed at alienating West European elite and public opinion from the US and promoting the long-term goal of changing the geopolitical balance on the continent in Moscow's favor.

7. Gromyko's talks with President Reagan and Secretary Shultz in September probably reinforced the Soviet leaders' conviction that some dramatic initiative was necessary to alter the international climate by forcing the Administration to revert to the more confrontational posture of its first two years in office. Moscow's strong preference for a harsh cold war atmosphere that would ease its domestic dilemmas and help contain worrisome centrifugal forces in Eastern Europe was evident in Gromyko's Revolution Day address on 6 November. He accused the Administration of being solely responsible for the fact that Soviet-US relations "are out of joint." "Washington," he charged, "has been wielding a big stick to that end and has done much to break up everything positive that was built up earlier by joint efforts." Gromyko implied that the President's declared interest in more constructive relations is only "a tribute to transient considerations" and that the US "has lost a great deal of credibility over the last few years."

8. The unfolding Soviet-Cuban-Sandinista scenario is targeted specifically on the Administration's repeated warnings against the introduction of advanced combat aircraft into Nicaragua. The basic assumption of the scenario is that the appearance of MIG-21s or perhaps L-39s at a Nicaraguan port or airfield will force Washington to issue an ultimatum to the Sandinista regime and possibly also to Moscow and Havana demanding the immediate removal of the aircraft. The scenario also assumes that this demand will be accompanied by at least an implied threat of US air strikes to destroy the aircraft if they are not removed. The Soviets and Cubans will respond to this ultimatum with a display of outrage and indignation over this blatant demonstration of "terrorism as state policy." They will vigorously defend Nicaragua's sovereign right to request and receive any military equipment it deems necessary for defense against "US aggression," and they will refuse categorically to remove the aircraft.

9. The Soviets will not undertake this scenario on the casual assumption that the Administration will back down and refrain from enforcing its demands. They will judge the probability of US air strikes or some form of naval quarantine of Nicaraguan ports as being quite high. The Soviets and Cubans, however, will discount the contingency of direct US military intervention using ground combat forces.

10. The Soviets and their clients are proceeding on the assumption that they will reap rich political rewards from this test of nerves regardless of the Administration's response. If Washington confines its reaction to protests, demands, and displays of naval and air power, Moscow, Havana, and Managua will portray this outcome as having exposed the Administration as a "paper tiger." The Soviets may deploy a larger number of SSBNs closer to US coasts in the Atlantic and Caribbean as a means of building a case that Soviet strategic power was the principal factor in restraining Washington's reaction. The D-II-class SSBN that was detected in the Caribbean south of Puerto Rico in late September--the first time a Soviet missile submarine has been identified in the Caribbean--may be a

SECRET

25X1

-4-

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harbinger of things to come.

11. On the other hand, far from relying on the highly uncertain prospect of deterring Washington from enforcing an ultimatum, the aim of the scenario may well be to goad the Administration into ordering air strikes. Moscow and Havana are prepared to gamble that the use of force by the US superpower against "defenseless" Nicaragua will precipitate an international uproar that will embarrass the Administration, discredit its policy toward Central America, antagonize Mexico and its Contadora partners, and isolate the US from its allies in Central America, Latin America, and Western Europe.

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